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Is This the End?

By JAMES ATLAS

WE'D seen it before: the Piazza San Marco in Venice submerged by the acqua alta; New Orleans underwater in the aftermath of Katrina; the wreckage-strewn beaches of Indonesia left behind by the tsunami of 2004. We just hadn't seen it here. (Last summer's Hurricane Irene did a lot of damage on the East Coast, but New York City was spared the worst.) "Fear death by water," T. S. Eliot intoned in "The Waste Land." We do now.

There had been warnings. In 2009, the New York City Panel on Climate Change issued a prophetic report. "In the coming decades, our coastal city will most likely face more rapidly rising sea levels and warmer temperatures, as well as potentially more droughts and floods, which will all have impacts on New York City's critical infrastructure," said William Solecki, a geographer at Hunter College and a member of the panel. But what good are warnings? Intelligence agents received advance word that terrorists were hoping to hijack commercial jets. Who listened? (Not George W. Bush.) If we can't imagine our own deaths, as Freud insisted, how can we be expected to imagine the death of a city?

History is a series of random events organized in a seemingly sensible order. We experience it as chronology, with ourselves as the end point — not the end point, but as the culmination of events that leads to the very moment in which we happen to live. "Historical events might be unique, and given pattern by an end," the critic Frank Kermode proposed in "The Sense of an Ending," his classic work on literary narrative, "yet there are perpetuities which defy both the uniqueness and the end." What he's saying (I think) is that there is no pattern. Flux is all.

Last month's "weather event" should have taught us that. Whether in 50 or 100 or 200 years, there's a good chance that New York City will sink beneath the sea. But if there are no patterns, it means that nothing is inevitable either. History offers less dire scenarios: the city could move to another island, the way Torcello was moved to Venice, stone by stone,

after the lagoon turned into a swamp and its citizens succumbed to a plague of malaria. The city managed to survive, if not where it had begun. Perhaps the day will come when skyscrapers rise out of downtown Scarsdale.

Humans are ingenious. Our species tends to see nature as something of a nuisance, a phenomenon to be outwitted. Consider efforts to save Venice: planners have hatched one scheme after another to prevent the city from sinking. Industrial development has been curtailed. Buildings dating from the Renaissance have been "relocated."

The most ambitious project, begun a decade ago, is the installation of mobile gates in the lagoons. Known by the acronym MOSE — the Italian name for Moses, who mythically parted the Red Sea — it's an intricate engineering feat: whenever the tide rises, metal barriers that lie in concrete bunkers on the sea floor are lifted by compressed air pressure and pivoted into place on hinges.

Is the Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico — the project's official name — some engineer's fantasy? It was scheduled for completion this year, but that has been put off until 2014. Even if, by some miracle, the gates materialize, they will be only a stay against the inevitable. Look at the unfortunate Easter Islanders, who left behind as evidence of their existence a mountainside of huge blank-faced busts, or the Polynesians of Pitcairn Island, who didn't leave behind much more than a few burial sites and a bunch of stone tools. Every civilization must go.

Yet each goes in its own way. In "Collapse," Jared Diamond showed how the disappearance of a civilization has multiple causes. A cascade of events with unforeseen consequences invariably brings it to a close. The Norse of Greenland cut down their trees (for firewood and other purposes) until there were no more trees, which made it a challenge to build houses or boats. There were other causes, too: violent clashes with the Inuit, bad weather, ice pileups in the fjords blocking trade routes. But deforestation was the prime factor. By the end, no tree fell in the forest, as there was none; and there would have been no one to hear it if it had.

“Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice,” declared Robert Frost. Another alternative would be lava. Pliny the Younger’s letters to Tacitus described the eruption of Mount Vesuvius: A plume of dirt and ash rose in the sky; rocks pelted Pompeii; and then darkness arrived. “It was not like a moonless or cloudy night, but like being in an enclosed place where the light has been doused.” Who did this? It must have been the gods. “Many were raising their hands to implore the gods, but more took the view that no gods now existed anywhere, and that this was an eternal and final darkness hanging over the world.” But of course it wasn’t the end of the world: it was just the end of them.

Contemplating our ephemerality can be a profound experience. To wander the once magnificent Roman cities strung along the Lycian coast of Turkey — now largely reduced to rubble, much still unexcavated — is to realize how extensive, how magisterial this civilization was. Whole cities are underwater; you can snorkel over them and read inscriptions carved into ancient monoliths. Ephesus, pop. 300,000 in the second century A.D., is a vast necropolis. The amphitheater that accommodated nearly 25,000 people sits empty. The Temple of Artemis, said to have been four times larger than the Parthenon, is a handful of slender columns.

YET we return home from our travels intoxicated by beauty, not truth. It doesn’t occur to us that we, too, will one day be described in a guidebook (Fodor’s North America 2212?) as metropolitans who resided in 60-story towers and traveled beneath the waves in metal-sheathed trains.

It’s this willed ignorance, I suspect, that explains why it’s difficult to process the implications of climate change for New York, even in the face of explicit warnings from politicians, not the most future-oriented people. Governor Andrew M. Cuomo has been courageous to make global warming a subject of public debate, but will taxpayers support his proposal to build a levee in New York Harbor? Wouldn’t it be easier to think of Sandy as a “once in a lifetime” storm? Even as Lower Manhattan continues to bail itself out — this time in the literal sense — One World Trade Center rises, floor by floor. The governor notes that “we have a 100-year flood every two years now,” which doesn’t stop rents from going up in Battery Park City.

Walking on New York's Upper East Side, I was reminded by the gargantuan white box atop a busy construction site that the Second Avenue line, first proposed in 1929, remains very much in the works. And why not? Should images of water pouring into the subway tunnels that occupied our newspapers a few weeks back be sufficient to stay us from progress? "I must live till I die," says the hero of a Joseph Conrad novel. The same could be said of cities.

When, on my way home at night, I climb the steps from the subway by the American Museum of Natural History — itself a monument to transience, with its dinosaurs and its mammoth and its skeleton of a dodo bird, that doomed species whose name has become an idiom for extinction — I feel more keenly than ever the miraculousness, the improbability of New York.

Looking down Central Park West, I'm thrilled by the necklace of green-and-red traffic lights extending toward Columbus Circle and the glittering tower of One57, that vertical paradise for billionaires. And as I walk past the splashing fountain in front of the museum's south entrance on West 77th Street, I recall a sentence from Edward Gibbon's ode to evanescence, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," in which "the learned Poggius" gazes down at the remains of the city from the Capitoline hill: "The public and private edifices, that were founded for eternity, lie prostrate, naked, and broken, like the limbs of a mighty giant; and the ruin is the more visible, from the stupendous relics that have survived the injuries of time and fortune."

This is our fate. All the more reason to appreciate what we have while we have it.

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